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Dissertation and Theses Notices

Gary McIntosh

Biola University, gary.mcintosh@biola.edu

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Compiled by Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D.

Each issue of the *Great Commission Research Journal* features recent dissertations and theses of interest to our readers. Particular attention is given to publications that present research on evangelism, church growth, church planting and multiplication, missional church, emerging/emergent church, communication theory, leadership theory, and other topics related to effective fulfillment of the Great Commission. Directors of doctoral programs, as well as graduating students, are encouraged to send notice of recent dissertations to Dr. Gary L. McIntosh, Dissertation Editor, at gary.mcintosh@biola.edu. Due to space limitations, and the large number of dissertations published each year, only a few dissertations are featured.

This issue of the *Great Commission Research Journal* features recent dissertations that focus on some aspect of *church turnaround* and church growth.

"Defining Characteristics of Turnaround Pastors among Evangelical Churches in the Rocky Mountain States." Author: Penfold, Gordon Everett, D.Min., Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, 2011. 220 pages.

abstract:

The church in North America is in decline. Church consultants and researchers estimate that 70% to 85% of the churches in America today are in a state of plateau or decline. While the population of the United States grows, the percentage of people attending church continues to plummet. The American church is in trouble!

However, there are bright spots on the church landscape. Many churches, after decades of being plateaued or in decline, are beginning to turn around and grow. These congregations are being reinvigorated and led by pastors who are termed "turnaround pastors." What separates a turnaround pastor from a non-turnaround pastor?

295

The thesis of this project is that there are measurable and quantifiable differences between turnaround and non-turnaround pastors. It was the design of this project to discover those differences by comparing a group of turnaround pastors with a group of non-turnaround pastors. Eight different areas of ministry were tested and comparisons made. To this end pastors and lay leaders were surveyed, the results catalogued, and a careful examination of the evidence was conducted. The conclusion of the research project is that there are distinct differences between turnaround and non-turnaround pastors. Those differences are recorded in the project.

"Turnaround Church Ministry: Causes of Decline and Changes Needed for Turnaround."
Author: Daniel C. Eymann, D.Min., Phoenix Seminary, 2011. 200 pages.

abstract:

The writer defines a turnaround church as *a church that was once thriving, has experienced significant decline or plateau, but has turned the corner and is experiencing new growth once again.*

The purpose of the dissertation is to examine the process of revitalizing a church and turning around a plateaued or dying church. The central research

question asks, what changes need to take place in plateaued or declining churches in order for them to turn around and become healthy, growing, vibrant churches again? What is the relationship, if any, between the changes needed and the issues that led to plateau or decline?

While this project examines both the causes of plateau and decline, and the changes needed for church revitalization, it goes the extra step and examines the relationship between the causes of decline and the changes that lead to church turnaround or renewal. The study found that a strong connection exists between the causes that led to decline and the changes needed for turnaround in a local church.

"Comparing Turnaround Leadership in a Rural Church and in Schools." Author: Mays, Ronald Brent, Ph.D., University of Louisville, 2011. 281 pages.

296

abstract:

This qualitative study sought to illuminate successful practices of a turnaround leader in a rural church that are applicable cross-contextually, so as to inform the leadership efforts of various organizations seeking to reproduce organizational renewal on a wide-scale basis.

Utilizing the principles of case study research, the researcher conducted participant observations, mined documents, and interviewed the pastor, three part-time staff members, and twenty-four members of a rural congregation in a South-central Kentucky congregation that had grown 289% in active membership over the last fourteen years. Proceeding with the assumption that leaders can, by the practice of specific, intentional behaviors, positively impact the ability of a congregation to reverse its path and experience turnaround, and seeking to illuminate those behaviors, this study was guided by the following research questions: (a) In a rural church that has experienced revitalization ("organizational turnaround"), how do the pastor and congregants perceive the experience? (b) How do they perceive the characteristics and behaviors of the pastor as "catalysts" in this transformation? (c) What leadership principles of successful turnaround church efforts can be extracted from their experiences that are comparable to those reported in the literature on school revitalization efforts?

The data from the study revealed that members did not recall specific events that led to turnaround as clearly as they recalled unity and harmony; this was contrasted to the period of turmoil and split immediately before the turnaround

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 2 [2012], Art. 18
and the initial, devastating split it endured twenty years prior. They did not describe events as much as they did their pastor who helped bring peace and a culture that was conducive to revitalization. With perhaps some credit to a youth program that was started under a previous pastor, and reinstituted under the turnaround pastor's leadership, responses to the question of precipitants to growth essentially described their pastor's personality—(a) a people person and (b) a detail person—and five intentional behaviors—(a) developing a community presence, (b) providing quality, meaningful worship, (c) educating and equipping members, (d) providing a vision for the future, and (e) empowering and mobilizing the laity.

This study revealed consistent themes that existed in the theoretical framework on schools provided by Kouzes and Posner (1987) as well as in the church and school turnaround lore. These findings propagate the notion that turnaround leaders often bear striking resemblances to one another, exhibiting many of the same personal character traits and intentional behaviors. These findings also suggest that turnaround leadership is not so much a product of individual, charismatic leadership as it is the product of consistent, sustained attention to sound leadership behaviors.

297

"Revitalization of the Urban Church: A Multi-case Study of Turnaround Churches." Author: Sullivan, Lisa Marie, D.Min., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2009. 116 pages.

abstract:

Mainline churches are in decline, and many are closing their doors. Decline is especially noted in urban and transitional settings. Thousands of churches have experienced decline to such an extent that they reach the death stage in the life cycle of the church. In the midst of this bleak forecast, some churches have reversed the cycle of decline into a new season of health, vibrancy, and growth. The purpose of this study was to distill common denominators essential to the process of changing declining urban United Methodist churches into vital, healthy, transformed faith communities.

The study consisted of a cross-sectional survey of United Methodist churches, across different geographical areas of the United States, with the results compiled in a descriptive analysis. Additionally, in-depth case studies, conducted with four of these churches through telephone interviews, were summarized qualitatively. Analysis of commonly shared key factors in the turnaround process revealed the necessary foundational components of revitalization.

McIntosh: Dissertation and Theses Notices

Major findings revealed a list of recurrent factors and common denominators necessary for successful turnaround. The change process was more flexible and organic in nature and required a large investment of time, effort, and physical, emotional, and spiritual perseverance to achieve new vitality and church health.

"Using '40 Days of Purpose' Spiritual Growth Campaign as a Key Intervention in Small Church Turnaround." Author: Ripato, Silas D., D.Min., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2005. 152 pages.

abstract:

The purpose of this study was to identify and evaluate the results of a major spiritual growth intervention diffused into the life of a small membership church. The study was based on the assumption that a long-term, well-developed, biblically-based, and intentionally-focused spiritual growth intervention would affect personal life change which, in turn, would affect the corporate life of the church. The intervention was designed around the five purposes that serve as keys to fulfilled living—worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and mission.

The study consisted of a researcher-designed, evaluative questionnaire of the understanding and involvement of each participant in the five life purposes. The method chosen to determine the results of the intervention was a pre-study, post-study design. The research findings validate the study.

"Small Church Revitalization within the Central Florida District of the Church of the Nazarene." Author: Sloan, George Edward, Jr., D.Min., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2001. 160 pages

abstract:

The purpose of this dissertation seeks to determine how small, Nazarene churches in Central Florida grow. The method of study was a multiple case study in the descriptive mode. This involved studying four Nazarene churches in Central Florida having turned around from small, established, declining congregations into growing churches with a twenty percent sustained increase within five years.

The research yielded thirteen instrumental factors in the turnaround of a declining church into a growing church. The top eight include: (1) Visionary

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 2 [2012], Art. 18

Pastoral Leadership. A primary instrument God uses to turn around a church is a pastor with a God-given vision for a preferred future and the courage to lead the congregation. (2) Quality Music and Worship. Improving the quality of music and worship became very instrumental in making the church attractive to new people as repeatedly mentioned by both pastors and lay leaders in the interviews. (3) A Willingness to Change. Each of the churches studied implemented change from within. They changed the songs they sang, the way they greeted and welcomed visitors, and their elements of worship by incorporating things like drama and drums in worship. (4) Prayer. Every church realized the importance of prayer and involved the congregation in prayer beyond the regularly scheduled services. (5) Preaching. The pulpit shapes the character of every local congregation. A pulpit where God's truth is proclaimed in a relevant fashion produces a healthy congregation. (6) Financial Support. These churches believed in tithing and boldly taught it to the congregations. (7) Spiritual Renewal. Spiritual renewal brought an awareness of the presence of God in the worship celebrations, resulting in harmony in the church and a desire to reach out and minister in the communities. (8) Lay Leadership/Ministry. Growing churches realize pastors cannot do all ministry themselves.

299

"A Turnaround for Tulsa Central Church of the Nazarene." Author: McKellips, Harold David, D.Min., Fuller Theological Seminary, Doctor of Ministry Program, 2000. 263 pages.

abstract:

This ministry focus paper looks at steps taken to make Central Church a "turnaround church," critically examining the purpose-driven turnaround strategy implemented and laying the groundwork for continuing the process over the next five years.

Central Church moved to South Tulsa in 1981. At the time of the move, the church was growing. Moving to the developing edge of the city, we anticipated that the next fourteen years would be years of vitality and growth. Instead, Central's attendance declined and then stabilized. (The decadal growth rate in Sunday school was -32% and -15% in the a.m. worship.)

When the researcher came to Central as senior pastor in 1994, Central was in need of a turnaround. Morale had declined even more than the numbers through a decade involving four different senior pastors, tremendous financial pressure, staff crises, lack of infrastructure and development of lay ministry, inadequate

education and parking space, and no clear, sustainable evangelistic strategy. The church adopted a biblical mission, a strategic plan to serve as a road map to help revitalize its ministry.

This project is divided into four sections. The first section looks at the church's history, growth patterns, and factors affecting growth based on "Natural Church Development." The second section establishes the biblical validity and importance of strategic planning and of being driven by a purpose. The third section examines the process of implementing both the strategic plan and the purposes of the church at Central. The fourth section looks toward the future. The statistical results are studied to see if there is evidence of a turnaround at Central. Next, steps and faith projections are made.

"A Theory for Rescuing Congregations from Decline and Its Application to the First Presbyterian Church." Author: Molyneux, Daniel R., D.Min., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1998. 189 pages.

abstract:

As many as eighty-five percent of all Christian congregations in America are either plateaued or declining. This ministry focus paper provides an investigation of the dynamics involved in church decline and provides an analysis of (1) Congregational lifecycles; (2) Signs and symptoms a congregation exhibits when on a plateau or in decline; (3) Why "mainline" Protestant denominations have declined; (4) Why tradition is the most deadly trait of declining Protestant congregations; (5) Congregational attributes for a successful turnaround from decline to growth; (6) The role of worship in a turnaround; (7) The necessity of spiritual warfare to a successful turnaround.

Church decline is a result of congregations ceasing to listen to and obey the voice of God. Whenever a congregation is in tune with God and His will, the church is healthy. When a congregation becomes comfortable with the status quo, whenever a church stops listening to and obeying God's voice, it enters a death cycle that results in stagnation, followed by decline and, ultimately, death.

One of the keys to remaining a vibrant, healthy, and growing congregation is not to confuse eternal and unchanging aspects of the church with those things that are temporary, changeable, and merely functional. Those Protestant congregations that have experienced long-term health, growth, and vibrancy are those which have an unshakeable "foundation" in the basics of the faith, combined with a great

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 2 [2012], Art. 18
flexibility in the temporary, cultural expressions of the church. The eternal core of the congregation never changes, but the temporary and cultural aspects of the church are constantly open to reevaluation and innovation.

Achieving a successful, long-term turnaround in a declining congregation primarily involves a spiritual transformation within the church. It includes (1) breaking through the spiritual bondages that may have oppressed the “body”; (2) reestablishing the congregation’s dynamic relationship with Christ; (3) rediscovering the aspects of the church that are eternal and unchanging, and those which are temporary and functional; (4) changing the temporary and cultural expressions of the congregation to be accessible to nonchurched persons outside the congregation; and (5) leading people into a more mature relationship with Jesus Christ.

“The Turnaround Church: A Proven Path for Implementing Change.” Author: Wilke, Paul Richard, D.Min., United Theological Seminary, 1997. 212 pages.

301

abstract:

This project studied how dramatic change can be implemented in a declining church. It targeted churches that grew from below 200 to above 250 in worship attendance.

The context was the Church of the Cross in Salina, Kansas, a one hundred-year-old United Methodist congregation in a twenty year decline. Following a dramatic turnaround, a business model called “The Proven Path” was used as a diagnostic guide to determine the key components of change. Interviews with turnaround pastors were conducted to evaluate this strategy for renewal. Clearly, turning a declining church around has a proven path.